

## **Assignment 2: Publishing History**

Sarah Harriet Burney's first novel, *Clarentine*, was printed for G.G and J. Robinson, in Paternoster-row. The Paternoster-row area of London was recognised in the eighteenth century as 'the centre of the wholesale book trade,' which housed approximately 40 printers and 40 booksellers<sup>1</sup>. The Robinsons were among the top four firms to be responsible for publications, reaching a high of fifty-four novels in the 1790s. George Robinson was recognised as one of the leading figures in the Paternoster-row area, which lead to a partnership with his brother John in 1784 and eventually his son George. As a thriving family business the Robinsons become involved with some of the century's most successful periodicals, including a share of the *Critical Review*, partnership with the *Town and Country Magazine* and the *Lady's Magazine*.

Information about the relationship between Sarah Harriet Burney and her printers G.G and J. Robinson and G. Wilkie is somewhat limited, particularly in regard to her first novel, *Clarentine*. The restriction of this information may be the result of Sarah's decision to remain anonymous. However, her letters also indicate that her half-brother, Charles Burney, established much of the correspondence between herself and the booksellers. Therefore, any discrepancy concerning the publication of her work is demonstrated predominately through her letters.

Sarah's letters to her half-brother Charles Burney, in 1808, indicate significant hostility towards the Robinsons in regard to their slowness in promoting and advertising her second novel *Geraldine Fauconberg*, the result of which led to the second edition of the novel being published by Henry Colburn in 1812. Sarah's animosity towards the Robinsons is indicated by her plea to her brother to recommend her a bookseller with whom she could negotiate her terms. The circumstance under

which Sarah was able to break her contract with J. Robinson and G. Wilkie is not stated. However, a letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> June 1796 indicates a possible explanation. The note, which was added by her father, Dr. Burney, states that ‘I should not be sorry if they were to recollect that the 16th of June is past—And if I might take the liberty of requesting them to begin Advertising—The whole is now printed within 50 pages’<sup>2</sup>. The reference to this particular date implies that the Robinsons may have broken some form of a contract by neglecting to advertise Sarah’s second novel by a certain time. This may therefore have enabled Sarah to transfer the rights to her novels over to Henry Colburn. Consequently, Colburn also published Sarah’s remaining three novels until 1839.

Henry Colburn’s take-over of the rights to publication proved to be a successful move for Sarah Harriet Burney. Colburn signified a great improvement in advertising, which may have helped Sarah’s most popular novel *Traits of Nature*, to sell out within three months. Furthermore, in a letter to her niece Charlotte Francis Barrett, Sarah is proud to declare that Colburn had agreed to give her £50 for each volume, £100 in advance and £100 within a further six months.

Sarah’s observations of the Robinsons as ‘too supine’ and Colburn as ‘too quackish’, emphasises her disapproving attitude to the role of publishers.<sup>3</sup> The Robinsons, who were renowned for their flamboyant lifestyle, clearly did not suit Sarah’s mild-natured personality. She found Colburn to be too forceful, particularly in regard to the subject of anonymity, which Sarah was adamant to protect. However, Colburn’s concern for marketing did appear to suit Sarah, which is evident by the publication of her later novels. Interestingly, in the 1800s, Colburn’s role as publisher surpassed the success of the Robinsons. As a result of the success of circulating libraries the Robinsons’ earlier success seemed to disappear.

The success of Sarah's third novel, *Traits of Nature*, is further established by Frances Burney's letters to her father and also by an account in the *Critical Review*, written in November 1812. In her letters Frances Burney is proud to relate the praise of Princess Elizabeth and other acquaintances of her half-sister's successful novel. She reports that 'Princess Elizabeth spoke to me in high terms of Sally's last work, & with much praise, though not equal, of *Clarentine*'<sup>4</sup>. Frances' reference to Sarah's first novel also establishes the success of her work within superior circles, indicating that from the publication of her first novel she was highly regarded as a novelist. However, despite Sarah Harriet Burney's visible success as a novelist it is evident that as the half-sister of Frances Burney the standard of her work was viewed in constant comparison. In the *Critical Review* of 1812, for example, Sarah is valued as a novelist and particularly for her 'good sense and abilities'<sup>5</sup>. However, the review also indicates that Sarah's *Traits of Nature* could also be mistaken for a peculiar version of Frances Burney's famous novel *Cecilia*. The publication of Frances Burney's successful novel *Camilla*, in the same year as Sarah's *Clarentine*, may also have affected Sarah's success as a predominant figure of the eighteenth century.

*Word Count 820*

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<sup>1</sup> Devon County Council, *The London Booktrades 1775-1800: a topographical guide. Introduction*, 2006, [http://www.devon.gov.uk/etched?\\_IXP\\_=1&IXR=100156](http://www.devon.gov.uk/etched?_IXP_=1&IXR=100156)

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Sarah Harriet Burney to [Charles Burney Jun.], 19 June 1808, in Peter Garside (ed.), *British Fiction 1800-1829: A Database of Production, Circulation and Reception*, 2004, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/publishing/gera08-32.html>

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Sarah Harriet Burney to Charlotte Francis Barrett, 1 Apr 1812, *The Letters of Sarah Harriet Burney*, ed. by Lorna J. Clark (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 157, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/publishing/trai12-24.html>

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Frances Burney D'Arblay to Doctor Burney, 10 Dec 1812, in Peter Garside (ed.), *British Fiction 1800-1829: A Database of Production, Circulation and Reception*, 2004, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/anecdotal/trai12-24.html>

<sup>5</sup> *Critical Review*, 4<sup>th</sup> series 2 (Nov 1812): 519-27, in Peter Garside (ed.), *British Fiction 1800-1829: A Database of Production, Circulation and Reception*, 2004, <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/titleDetails.asp?title=1812A024>